

Finding Moon Short Guide

Finding Moon by Tony Hillerman

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Characters

Finding Moon's protagonist, Malcolm "Moon" Mathias, is, like Jim Chee, Hillerman's Navajo cop, a gloomy, conflicted character. Now the managing editor of a third-rate newspaper, the Morning PressRegister of Durango, Colorado, Moon realizes that his life is a mess. He rents a room in his house to the twenty-something, voluptuous Debbie, who sometimes sleeps with him when she's not out with other men. In the office, he has to oversee Rooney, a reporter with a propensity for getting drunk when Moon needs him the most. His boss, Shakeshaft, views the paper only as a source of revenue and threatens to fire Moon over any disagreements.

A sense of failure permeates Moon's personality. He believes that he has failed everyone close to him, and he assumes that his attempt to find his niece in Cambodia will end in failure. He constantly looks for a reason to give up the search, especially given the political turmoil of Southeast Asia.

During the course of the novel, however, Moon resolves his many conflicts and becomes a whole person. He meets Ricky's friends and employees, all of whom respect Moon's abilities because Ricky spoke so highly of him. He comes to realize that Ricky considered him a great success and wanted Moon to work with him in his air transport business before Ricky died in a crash. By talking through his problems with Father Julian, Moon comes to realize that even he can be forgiven. And, as his feelings for Osa deepen, he realizes that he can have a romantic relationship with a good woman close to his own age.

A second major character is the mysterious Lum Lee, an elderly man of Chinese extraction who lived until recently in Vietnam. Moon first met Lee in Los Angeles when Lee contacted Moon about an important package that Ricky was to deliver to him on the flight that crashed.

Moon infers that Lee is shipping some sort of contraband, either guns or drugs, but as the novel unfolds, and Moon meets Lee again in Manila and goes with him to Vietnam, Moon learns that Lee, a devout Buddhist, is interested only in locating his family's kam taap, a container filled with the bones of his ancestors that Ricky had agreed to find and deliver.

Moon comes to realize that Lee is not a drug dealer but an idealist in search of a central element of his religion. At the end of the novel, Lee plays an important role in Moon's relationship with Osa. Assuming that she couldn't be interested in him, Moon plans to leave her in Manila. To make him recognize the importance of Osa to him, Lee quotes various ambiguous Chinese maxims which lead Moon to realize that he should have the confidence to further his relationship with her.

As usual in Hillerman novels, Finding Moon contains strong women characters.



While sick during the entire novel due to a heart attack, his mother, Victoria Mathias Morick, remains a strong presence in Moon's consciousness. When Moon was a child, she had the strength of will to nurse her paralyzed husband at home while at the same time managing the family printing business. When Moon was in danger of being incarcerated, she married Dr. Morick to save her son from prison. When she learns that her younger son Ricky has died and left a child in Cambodia, she arranged to travel to the Philippines in order to collect her granddaughter. Only the heart attack prevented her from making the flight.

Osa is a second strong female character. Alone and with no support and thin finances, she travels to the Philippines to begin her quest to save her younger halfbrother, Damien, who serves as a doctor and Lutheran missionary in an isolated Cambodian village, Kampot. Determined to become a saint, he decides to remain at his post as Pol Pot and his minions travel the nation attempting to erase all foreign influences. Equally determined to go to her brother to convince him to leave, Osa connects with Moon in hopes that he can help her reach Cambodia.

Her strength and her determination to succeed help strengthen Moon's resolve to save his niece. By the novel's conclusion, Moon comes to recognize that Osa's strength of character and elegance of bearing are more desirable than Debbie's youth and beauty.

The novel also contains several minor characters of note that help advance the story. The shady lawyer Roberto Bolivar Castenada, for instance, is Moon's initial contact in Manila. He was supposed to oversee the flight of Ricky's daughter from Cambodia to the Philippines but lost track of her. Father Julian is a Catholic priest in the Graham Greene tradition.

He listens to Moon's informal confessions but cannot offer absolute solace given the confusing state of the world.

Yet another interesting minor character is Nguyen Nung, the wounded South Vietnamese soldier who assists Moon, Osa, and Lee on their trip into Cambodia.



Social Concerns

Unlike Tony Hillerman's popular detective fiction set in the American Southwest, *Finding Moon* is set primarily in Southeast Asia. The change in setting points to a change in Hillerman's interests, and the novel addresses several social concerns new to his work. The main character, Malcolm Mathias (nicknamed Moon due to a childhood passion for Moon Pies) finds his life influenced by powerful contemporary social forces.

One of these is the poor state of health care in America due to the incompetence of some doctors. When Moon was a teenager in Oklahoma, his father suffered from a lung disorder, which the doctors at the local hospital misdiagnosed as pneumonia. The illness turned out to be tuberculosis, but this fact was not discovered until the disease had spread to the father's spinal column, paralyzing him from the neck down. Moon watched his mother nurse his father until it became clear, when Moon overheard an argument between the two, that the father wanted to die in order to allow his wife to live a normal life free from her nursing duties.

In an act of desperation, Moon attempts to shoot his father, who talks his son out of an act that would "make a bad situation worse." In short, the medical misdiagnosis ruined his childhood and forced his family to deal with his father's pain and suffering for years.

Hillerman comments a second time on the American health care system when his mother, now elderly, has a heart attack in Los Angeles on her way to the Philippines to locate her newly discovered granddaughter, the child of her younger son, Ricky. When Moon arrives at the large, public hospital, he can find no one willing to discuss his mother's condition. Dr. Jerrigan, the doctor on call, refuses to explain his mother's prognosis on the grounds that another doctor, who was off that day, had admitted her, and she was therefore not Jerrigan's responsibility. Disgusted by the lack of concern, Moon uses personal contacts to get in touch with a cardiologist in Los Angeles, who moves his mother to Cedars-Sinai, a far better hospital. Hillerman's point is clear: one cannot count on American medicine and doctors to do a good job.

Hillerman's main social theme, however, is a historical one—the American failure in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations. Set in the 1970's, the book uses as its historical backdrop the corrupt Marcos regime in the Philippines, the fall of South Vietnam, the destruction of Cambodia, and the evacuation of Americans from the region as it slips into political chaos. One of the book's purposes is to explore the failed American policies in Southeast Asia in general. In the Philippines, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos reign over a corrupt government propped up by American money. In South Vietnam, as communist troops tighten the noose around Saigon, Americans scramble into helicopters from the Embassy roof, leaving their Vietnamese supporters to suffer the consequences. Cambodia, once a peaceful country, is now patrolled by Pol Pot's teenage thugs who beat civilians to death with bamboo poles—to save ammunition. Hillerman carefully chronicles the encroachment of madness over this region by placing at the head of each chapter a journalistic description of historical events that took place at the same time as the fictional ones.



Techniques

Hillerman sets the novel against the backdrop of the fall of Vietnam. To make the connection between the historical and the fictional events clear, he places at the head of each chapter a brief news story describing the historical event that occurred that day. Each fictional day therefore has a historical date and a historical event that help establish context for the fictional action. For instance, after Moon and his small group have entered Vietnam on their way to Cambodia, Hillerman prefaces the chapter with a short piece from the New York Times dated April 28, 1975, describing the announcement that the new Cambodian government would not continue any foreign intervention and that Khmer Rouge troops were executing their own population. This historical information heightens the sense of danger attached to fictional events and places them within a larger context.

In addition to being a historical novel, *Finding Moon* also contains elements of the coming-of-age novel. Largely through flash-backs and conversations between Moon and Father Julian, we learn of the early experiences that formed Moon. The most important of these were dealing with his father's paralysis and death, losing his best friend in the army due to his drunken driving, and his relationship with his younger brother, Ricky, who idolized him.

The novel traces Moon's emotional growth as he develops a stronger sense of self. When the novel begins, Moon is dominated by feelings of worthlessness that manifest themselves in the way he lives his life: he hates his job as managing editor of the *Post-Register* but can't bring himself to move on; he knows that his relationship with Debbie is at best temporary, and he suffers from feelings of guilt due to his mother's marriage. By the end of the novel he plans to marry Osa, a strong woman closer to his age with a strong character; he is leaving his job to take over Ricky's Southeast Asian transportation business; and he succeeds in finding his niece and giving his mother what she always wanted, a granddaughter.

Finally, the novel contains strong elements of adventure. The last third of the novel describes Moon and his group's slipping by boat into Vietnam and locating his brother's transportation business.

It then traces the group through Vietnam into Cambodia to Vin Ba, the village where Ricky's child lives. As the characters travel through South Vietnam and Cambodia as North Vietnam and Pol Pot begin to exert their control over the two nations, the group must slip through road blocks and avoid marauding soldiers.

Hillerman captures well the danger and the suspense of the trek.



Themes

While he sets *Finding Moon* in a location far from the American Southwest, Hillerman draws on some themes common to his other novels. One of the most important of these is the need for understanding among people of different cultures.

The novel traces Moon's attempt to locate in Cambodia the child of Ricky, his deceased younger brother, and a Cambodian woman, now also dead. Moon is anxious to find the infant girl for many reasons—not the least of these being his mother's intense desire for a grandchild—but he is particularly concerned that the child will suffer because of her mixed parentage. He is told that in Southeast Asia, such children, especially those born of unions between Americans and Asians, were despised. As one character puts it, "In Asia people are very proud.

They don't like those of other races. The Khemers don't like the Laotians, and the Laotians don't like the Thais, and the Vietnamese don't like the Montagnards, and nobody likes people who are mixed."

He did not want his niece to suffer within such a deep system of prejudice.

Meanwhile, as Moon begins his search in the Philippines, where his niece was supposed to have been deposited after being flown out of Cambodia, he meets Osa van Winjgaarden, a woman of Dutch heritage who had lived her life in Asia.

Like Moon, she is trying to locate a lost relative, her brother, who serves as a missionary in Cambodia, in order to save him from Pol Pot's regime. As Moon and she work together to sneak first into Vietnam and then Cambodia, they gradually realize that, despite their cultural differences, they love each other. Like his brother Ricky's relationship with his Cambodian wife, Moon's love for Osa symbolizes for Hillerman the possibility of multicultural understanding, a major theme in most of his novels.

A second theme, that of guilt and redemption, also functions in the novel.

Moon has suffered all his life from guilt that resulted from two major sources.

While in the army, he had gotten drunk, stolen an army vehicle, and wrecked it, killing his best friend in the process. He felt deeply responsible for this tragedy.

But that was only one cause of his guilt.

When the army charged him with several felonies that could result in a twenty-year prison term, Moon and his mother did not have the resources to mount a strong defense. To save him from such harsh punishment, his mother married the wealthy Dr. Morick, who bored her but had wealth and political connections powerful enough to arrange to have Moon's charges reduced so that he was only fined and discharged from the service. Because of this sequence of events, Moon felt that he was a failure, especially in his mother's eyes, and it is not until he meets Father Julian, a Catholic



priest who befriends him, that Moon begins to expiate his guilt. It is through two long conversations with the priest that Moon comes to realize that his sense of failure was largely self imposed.

Key Questions

One of the best ways to begin a discussion of this novel is to examine Moon as a character. We learn, for instance, that he is overcome with guilt over three major events: his role in his best friend's death in the truck wreck, his role in his mother's entering a loveless second marriage to save Moon from prison, and his role in allowing his father to suffer a long and painful death. Because of this guilt, he hasn't developed psychologically, and both his professional and his personal lives are in disarray. An interesting discussion could revolve around the reasons for Moon's unhappiness. Should he feel guilty for his supposed shortcomings?

And related to Moon's guilt is his redemption. What role does Father Julian play in this process? What role does Osa play?

1. How does Moon's character develop throughout the novel? Does he become a better person? If so, why? What personal problems does he overcome?
2. Is it important that Moon is a journalist? Why or why not?
3. Is Osa van Winjgaarden the right woman for Moon? Is she too much like his mother? Is she better for him than Debbie?
4. How useful are the journalistic passages that preface each chapter in establishing historical context for the novel's action?
5. In his detective novels set in the Southwest, Hillerman has been successful in creating convincing Navajo characters such as Chee and Leaphorn. Is he as successful in drawing Lun Lee or does Lee seem more of a racial stereotype than the Navajos?
6. How successful is Hillerman in creating the settings for the novel? Do we get a detailed picture of Manila? Of Vietnam?
Of Cambodia?

Literary Precedents

Finding Moon is best compared to novels such as Henry James's *The American* (1877) that place a character in the midst of a foreign culture that forces him to confront his own needs and limitations.

As James's Christopher Newman did in France, Moon discovers himself and his shortcomings in the Phillipines, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Finding Moon can also be discussed in the context of Graham Greene's Catholic novels, especially those set in Third World cultures. Like typical Greene protagonists, Moon finds that the Asian context forces him to confront issues about his past and present life. The Greene influence appears most strongly in the discussions between Moon and Father Julian, a Catholic priest who lacks simple answers in a confusing world.

Related Titles

Finding Moon is different from most of Hillerman's recent fiction for two reasons. First, it is set in Southeast Asia rather than in the American Southwest.

Because Hillerman is not as familiar with Asia as a setting as he is with New Mexico, the novel lacks the specific sense of place that contributes to the success of his Navajo mysteries. While the cock fighting scene set in Manila is effectively written and offers a sense of place, the scenes set in Vietnam and Cambodia are far too generic to capture the feel for those two countries. There is no equivalent in Finding Moon, for instance, to the wonderful description in his latest Navajo mystery, *Fallen Man*, of a drive down the Colorado mountains to the New Mexico desert as two air masses collide to create a wall of fog that slides down the mountain like a silent waterfall.

Second, *Finding Moon* is a departure from Hillerman's other work in that it is not a traditional murder mystery. Although the novel has a mystery in its core, the location of Ricky's child in Cambodia, the novel has more in common with the political thriller than with the traditional detective novel. The question that drives the novel is not where the child is; instead, the question is whether or not Moon and his band of supporters will arrive in time to rescue her from the onslaught of Pol Pot's thugs.



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